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AUTHOR Moutray, Carol L.
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ABSTRACT

A study examined the influence of a humorous genre study on children's writing from writer's workshop and children's projects during a language arts period. The study explored the type of humor selected by children to assimilate into their writing and projects. Humorous material with ambiguous language was presented in multiple formats of print, visual, and auditory forms. Using a qualitative design with multiple case studies to represent exemplary children, 10 third grade students were chosen, based on factors affecting humor appreciation and comprehension: cognitive ability, gender, cultural background, and personality. Data sources included observations, children's writing, projects, and reflections. Results indicated that the children's expressions of humor were influenced by genre forms and topics and that inclusion of humor depended upon several contributing factors including cognitive ability, and assistance with, purpose in, and length of writing. The social context within the classroom fostered expression of humor. Results support the use of humor in the classroom curriculum for literacy development. (Contains a table of data and 22 references.) (Author/CR)

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ED 396 303

THE EFFECT OF A GENRE STUDY OF HUMOROUS MATERIAL WITH AMBIGUOUS LANGUAGE ON CHILDREN'S WRITING

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Carol Moutray
King's College
Wilkes-Barre, PA

CS215341

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The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of a humorous genre study on children's writing from writer's workshop and children's projects during a language arts period. The type of humor selected by children to assimilate into their writing and projects was examined. Humorous material with ambiguous language was presented in multiple formats of print, visual, and auditory forms.

A qualitative design with multiple case studies was chosen to represent exemplary children within a third grade class. Ten children were chosen based on Kappas' (1967) factors affecting humor appreciation and comprehension: cognitive ability, gender, and cultural background. Data sources included observations, children's writing, projects, and reflections. Analysis of humor was based on Alberghene's (1988) hierarchical themes and Kappas' (1967) categories. All four themes and ten categories of humor appeared in the children's writing and projects. The children expression of humor was influenced by genre forms and topics.

Findings indicated that inclusion of humor depended on several contributing factors including cognitive ability, assistance with, purpose in, and length of writing. The social context within the classroom fostered expression of humor. Conclusions drawn from the study support the use of humor in classroom curriculum for literacy development.

Background for the Study

As a result of traditional skills approach, many students have a narrow view of literacy, tend to interpret all discourse in a linear and literal manner, and focus on isolated, decontextualized elements of language (Moffett, 1992; Andrews, 1995). In essence, classroom instruction has emphasized a single standard of correctness and

ignored the changing features of language and the communicative aspect of language.

The fragmented literacy curriculum has made it difficult for children to thoughtfully interpret content and grasp the commonalties in literacy concepts and processes. However, when curriculum is integrated, literacy instruction blends process skills with content to provide a broader and more cohesive focus. The challenge to teachers is to develop a picture of whole literacy processes in a manner that is feasible and helpful for children. Literacy curriculum should provide a context in which students work on problems, projects, and products that genuinely engage them in learning while holding their interest (Gardner, 1991). The instruction should present literacy in multiple forms, so children will be able to perceive the whole process. Instruction should facilitate literacy by integrating reading, language, and writing components in meaningful context. Listening and speaking should occur within the learning program as children actively participate in their own learning. In the process, children develop reflective,

metalinguistic awareness of language as they gain knowledge about language.

In an integrated curriculum, genre studies provide language activities that provide literacy development. Genre studies have a positive influence on students' construction of meaning by stimulating meaningful activities (Van Vlient, 1992). The genre provides genuine, authentic language from which students are able to formulate generalizations. A genre study provides children with both a range of choices for reflection and opportunities to examine relationships among listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Readers fluctuate between the text and experiences to generate meaning. In addition, readers make both conscious and unconscious decisions about assimilating formal elements of literature, such as style and structure, and the ideas generated from the text into their writing (Rosenblatt, 1976).

This research describes a genre study of humorous materials that integrated literacy areas. The study included materials in a variety of formats, daily reading, language and writing experiences, ambiguous language exposure, discussions, projects, and decision

making opportunities. Children actively participated in an investigation of humor.

Humor challenges children to understand incongruities by making creative connections between content and schema. Children are compelled to listen and look carefully and critically as they attempt to understand humor (Ohanian, 1988). As humor exploits specific knowledge information, children learn to make connections and think logically to comprehend the material. Humor is created by altering the patterns and syntax of language. Children must understand standard language forms to appreciate the variance and to construct meaning for the humor.

Exposure to humorous material assists in understanding ambiguous language. Humor assists in language development by presenting materials that are rich in word play. Humor depends on the rich and varied incongruity that results from the ambiguous characteristic of language. In any language, there are more meanings than there are words or ways to combine words. By experiencing humorous materials, children have the opportunity to construct an understanding of the ambiguous language.

The Present Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the influence of a genre study of humorous material on children's written language and projects. The following questions guided the study: (1) How did experience with a genre study of humorous material influence children's writing and projects? and (2) What types of humorous themes and categories are selected by children to assimilate into their written language and projects?

The humorous genre in this study included written, visual, and oral formats. The formats were chosen based on Gardner's (1991) theory that learning is better served if presented in a number of ways through a variety of means. Gardner suggested that when learners are provided with multiple entry points, understanding is enhanced and broadened, as multiple entry points accommodate children's preferred learning styles. In this study, entry points included reading humorous stories, requiring deductive reasoning from known to unknown, examining terminology about humor, emphasizing sensory features to capture attention, and allowing manipulation of humorous materials.

By interacting with an assortment of literacy experiences using humorous material, children began to construct an array of meanings and associations for language. To promote deep processing of language, experiences with the genre included discussions about language and required children to create justifications for discovered relationships and associations (Beck, McKeown, & Omanson, 1987). As a result, more perspectives emerged that assisted in understanding content.

Theoretical Framework

In a constructivist classroom, learning is facilitated through experiences that help children internalize, reshape, and transform new information. In addition, supportive instruction, or scaffolding, from students or teachers is provided to enable students to understand the learning experience (Harris & Pressley, 1991). Children's search for and achievement of clarity provides a satisfying experience. The classroom environment promotes children's risk-taking while fostering the drive to achieve and solve incongruity. Children need the opportunity to reveal their own ideas and points of view, formulate their own questions, gather their own

responses, and listen to other perspectives (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). As children gain confidence, they are in a position to generalize their new knowledge to other domains.

Real understanding occurs when children participate fully in the development of their own knowledge by assimilating old knowledge and new knowledge (Harris & Pressley, 1991). Bruner (1966) posited four instructional features to further children's development: 1) experiences that provide a predisposition toward learning; 2) instruction that presents aspects in a manner that facilitates understanding; 3) sequence of instruction that is effective for the learner; and 4) instruction that contains intrinsic rewards for achieving competency.

In a genre study of humorous material, children are given the opportunity to deepen their understanding of language. Simply put, humor is the comic quality in a person, experience, or idea that amuses or makes one laugh (Schwartz, 1977). In humorous material, a single word encourages semantic discrepancy by positioning two legitimate interpretations side-by-side (McDowell, 1979).

Phonology, syntax, and semantics work together to produce alternate interpretations of language.

There are several factors that appear to explain the differing levels of individual response to humor. Kappas (1967) identified four factors that determine an individual's humorous attitude (regardless of age) and affect the perception and expression of humor. (1) Gender accounted for boys and girls identifying different items as funny to different degrees and the situations classified as humorous. (2) Cognitive ability accounted for a greater variety of situations perceived as humorous as well as the form and expression. (3) Cultural background influenced preference and appreciation based on life-style. (4) Personality influenced expressive behavior and humorous attitude as introverts and extroverts perceived and expressed different forms of humor. A combination of personality, gender, cognitive ability, and cultural background determines individuals' humorous attitude and expression of humor.

Humor facilitates the constructivist perspective by providing material for children to manipulate and pursue as metalinguistic

awareness develops (Bernstein, 1986). In order to understand humor, the features of language must be identified and assembled into larger constructions of meaning for resolutions (McDowell, 1979). Learning is enhanced because humor arouses, motivates, and stimulates children's thinking. At the same time, humor improves the classroom climate by making the curriculum less threatening and promoting an attitude of self-confidence (Speigel, 1992).

In a classroom engaged in humor, language is processed through reading and writing activities. During the reading and writing process, children construct and reconstruct ideas (Squire, 1983). Thinking occurs through language (Britton, 1972). Through talking and listening children relate experiences and ask questions that encourage interaction. Humor provides children with a context for exploring and constructing meaning for language.

When literacy is presented with an integrated approach children are able to relate the components into a whole, which facilities comprehension. As the language of humor is understood, children assimilate the language among reading, speaking, and writing activities. Tierney and Shanahan (1991) found that children exhibit

more inquisitive attitudes, more thoughtful consideration of ideas, and more engaged learning when reading and writing occur together.

Method

The research was a qualitative, multiple case study design. The variety of interactions and responses in a classroom context were examined to investigate the phenomena of assimilating humor from a genre study into children's writing and projects. Because of the richness of the context, multiple sources of evidence were needed. Multiple-case studies were selected for predictably different replication to cover the scope and depth of the phenomena (Yin, 1993).

Ten case studies were chosen from a third-grade of 21 students. The class was in a large suburban school district in the Midwest. Cases were chosen to exemplify the factors of humor appreciation (Kappas, 1967) and to attribute casual relationships for constructivism and the reading-writing connection. Selection was based on cognitive ability, equal representation of gender, and different cultural backgrounds. Cognitive ability was based on the

complete battery score and ability rating on the Stanford Achievement Test.

For each category, two children were chosen as exemplary for above average ability, average ability, below average ability, learning disabled, and ethnic minority children. An attempt was made to include equal number of females and males among the ten children. Random stratified sampling was utilized for selection.

The researcher was an observer during the writer's workshop and a participant observer during the reading/language period. Subjects for analysis were not selected until the end of the study to minimize experimenter bias.

During a language arts period which included reading, language, and writer's workshop, the children were observed on a daily basis for four weeks. To begin each day, the children were engaged in writer's workshop for approximately one hour. Then for the next hour in the reading/language period, the children were engaged in a genre study of humorous material with ambiguous language. In whole class, small group, and individual activities, children read

books from literature sets, discussed the books, viewed and explored humorous materials.

During the genre study, the children were engaged with a variety humorous materials. Selection criteria for the materials were: (1) classified or described as humorous or funny by literary reviews, (2) examined by the teacher and researcher for lewd language or drawings inappropriate for seven to ten year old children, and (3) represented a variety of media (written, visual, and auditory).

During the first week of the study, the children were engaged in discussions about the concept of humor and appreciation of humor. The genre study began as the teacher read aloud a humorous book. Children categorized ways of expressing humor and listened to audio-recorded humor.

During the second week, the children engaged in whole class, small, group, and individual experiences with genre materials. Children read literature set books, shared ideas, and constructed meaning for materials in discussion groups. Exploration of the genre allowed the children to listen to, read, write, and/or create humorous material.

During the third week, day-to-day routine and activities varied based on involvement with materials. During the fourth week, the children formed groups to work on projects. At the end of the genre study, the children presented their projects to the class and invited guests.

The research was designed to include multiple data collection strategies. Data included: (1) observation and participant observation fieldnotes, (2) photocopies of children's writing during writer's workshop, and (3) photocopies, audio/video-recordings children's projects at the end of the genre study.

Writing and projects were analyzed for inclusion of humor with a holistic approach. The writing was viewed as a whole to consider humorous themes, based on Alberghene's (1988) hierarchy, and inclusion of humorous categories (Kappas, 1967). Humorous categories appearing separately from humorous themes were reviewed. Writing was reviewed by three raters for whom interrater reliability was established.

Writing was evaluated for the four humorous themes in Alberghene's (1988) hierarchical list. High comedy of human folly is

at the top; word play, wit, and satire are next; nonsense and situational humor are third; and slapstick or physical humor are at the bottom. If a piece of writing contained a humorous theme, the type of humor was determined and the level of the humor on the hierarchy noted.

Writing was also analyzed by Kappas' (1967) ten categories of humor. The categories, which are not arranged in a hierarchy, are: (1) exaggeration, which makes use of obvious over- or understatement; (2) incongruity, which associates usually incompatibles; (3) surprise, which exploits the unexpected; (4) slapstick, which depends on fast and zany physical activity; (5) the absurd, which lacks reason, is foolish or ridiculous; (6) human predicaments, which make the character seem foolish or outdone; (7) ridicule, which is teasing and mockery of others; (8) defiance, which is a release of hostility through rebellion; (9) violence, which releases hostility; and (10) verbal humor, which manipulates language.

Results and Conclusions

Analysis of the children's writing and projects revealed that of Alberghene's (1988) four themes, three appeared in the children's writing. None of the writing sets contained the lowest level of slapstick or physical humor theme. However, one project at the end of the genre study did contain a theme of physical humor. All of Kappas' (1967) categories appeared in the children's writing, regardless of the theme of the writing (see Table 1).

Differences in culture, gender, personality, and cognitive ability were apparent in the choices of humor that the children assimilated into their writing. Cultural influence was along items denoting popular American culture rather than ethnic background. No apparent difference was noted for gender. Although personalities were not specifically addressed in case selection, the influence of personality was evident in the children's writing topics and projects. Children with higher cognitive ability used more humor in their writing.

The effect of cognitive ability on assimilating humor into writing and projects is seen when Table 1 is reviewed. Rebecca and

Max, with above average ability, included more humorous themes and categories than the other children. They were able to incorporate all the themes and categories into their writing and/or projects.

In cross case analysis, the influence of the genre on the children's writing and projects was evident in two ways. Evidence of the influence was seen in topics for stories and format of projects that paralleled materials in the genre study. Humorous themes in the children's writing were influenced by themes in genre video-recordings and books. Project presentations included auditory, visual, and written formats.

Other contributing factors for the amount of humor in the children's writing and projects included length of the writing, assistance with writing, and purpose for writing. Children that wrote only short stories did not incorporate as many instances of humor into their writing. Humor seemed to develop out of more complex story lines in longer writing. Another contributing factor was assistance in developing writing ideas. Some children needed assistance in transferring concepts from the genre to their writing.

An additional factor to include humor was that some children needed a purpose for connecting genre characteristics into their writing.

Several conclusions can be drawn from the study. Social interaction enhances humor appreciation and expression. Not only did children enjoy reading, viewing, and hearing humorous materials, they delighted from sharing humor. Peer reaction motivated and influenced children's participation, reaction, and interaction with genre materials and the production of humorous writing.

A classroom curriculum desiring to develop language awareness should include humor. The relaxed environment during a humorous genre study promotes interchanges of ideas, construction of meaning, and enjoyment of learning as children manipulate language. As children become acquainted with various features of the genre, they should be encouraged to write in the genre style. When the style is brought to a conscious level (Bearse, 1992), children are able to maximize their ability to transfer the style to their own writing.

Importance of the Study

From exposure to a humorous genre, opportunities to increase literacy competencies are provided. Humor created interest and provided relevant material for learning by serving as a challenge for solving incongruent ideas and understanding language. Language acquisition and understanding humor transferred among literacy components as linguistic ability increased.

Using multiple forms of materials enabled children to experience different forms of humor and assisted them in understanding complex literacy concepts. After reading, listening, viewing, and discussing humor, humor was transformed into writing. The language from the genre material appeared in the children's writing and projects demonstrating the reading-writing relationship (Phillips, 1986; Tierney & Pearson, 1983).

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Table 1. Humorous Themes and Categories in the Children's Writing.

	Aaron	Allie	Tim	Sharon	Rebecca	Melody	James	Barry	Leah	Max
Themes (Hierarchy):										
Human Folly					W					W
Word Play & Wit	W		W		W			W	W	W
Nonsense & Situation		W			W			W		W
Physical Humor										P
Categories (Arbitrary Order):										
Exaggeration					W			W		W
Incongruity	W	W	W	W	W	R	W	W		W
Surprise		W		R	W	R		W		W
Slapstick					W					
Absurdity		W	R	R	W	R	W	W	W	W
Human Predicament		W			W					
Ridicule				W	W					W
Defiance										W
Violence								W		W
Verbal Humor	W		W	W	W		W	W	W	

W = Writing R = Riddles P = Project